



## Report to the 29th District Representative Steve Conway

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# Creating and Protecting Washington Jobs



Thanks to constituents like you who responded to my last survey, I was able to advocate more effectively for the 29<sup>th</sup> Legislative District. The results showed me that over seventy-three percent of those who responded said they knew someone who has lost their job, and almost forty percent were worried about losing theirs or their health coverage.

The House Commerce and Labor Committee, which I have chaired for 5 years now, addressed many of the issues critical to job creation and protection in our state. However, keeping jobs won't matter unless we have a world-class education system. Some of the key pieces of legislation to pass this year help schools and students achieve the level of education necessary to compete and succeed in a global economy.

## *Investing in Education*

- **Expanding the Levy Fund Base:** This allows most public school districts to increase their budgets without any tax increase, based on already approved local school levies. Districts would be able to collect the full amount of locally approved levies – funding that would otherwise have been unavailable due to education reductions made last year when the state faced a \$2.7 billion budget deficit.
- In addition, school districts that are successful at raising student achievement on test scores won't lose the Learning Assistance Program (LAP) funding, while struggling districts will still receive the targeted funding and technical assistance they need. This is especially important for schools and school districts with special-needs students and immigrant students who are not native English speakers. This is especially important for Tacoma, Lakewood, and Franklin Pierce school districts, which have higher levels of special needs students.

The Legislature also took important strides forward to reform the WASL system, which I supported. I did not, however, support the diversion of funding from our public schools to form charter schools. Funding for Public Education is already stretched too thin. The Legislature has failed to fully fund the two initiatives, 728 and 732, and this is no time to reduce spending even further for charter schools.

## *Higher Education and Worker Training*

In 2008, the largest graduating class in state history will knock on the doors of our community colleges and universities and unless we make more room, 33,000 students will be turned away.

In order to begin addressing the increased demand, we increased funding to our community colleges and universities so students and workers seeking employment can receive the quality education they need to land jobs in the changing economy. We passed legislation that funds:

- \$10 million in the budget to pay for 3,000 more enrollments at our colleges and universities.
- \$7 million in enrollments so more students can earn degrees in high-demand fields like nursing, computer science, and biotech.
- \$4.3 million in the budget for more Promise Scholarships so students afford to attend college.



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- \$117 million in improvements to higher education facilities are included in the capital budget.
- And we increased financial aid for college students by \$6.8 million so our students can receive the quality education they need to land jobs in the changing economy.
- Apprenticeships - To build the skills of the next generation of construction workers and to better meet workforce needs for advanced job-training, community and technical colleges were directed to create new pathways that expand associate degree opportunities via apprenticeship programs. The final budget also provides funding for expanding the Duwamish Training Center with its special emphasis on apprenticeship training.

## Protecting Workers

Washington's economy flourishes when job growth is on the rise and a skilled workforce is ready to fill in-demand jobs. Our state has always been a great place to do business, and House Democrats worked to strengthen Washington's economy in 2004 with legislation that boosted skills training and protected worker's rights.

Washington's unemployment rate is expected to remain high this year — near 7 percent. As Chair of the House Commerce and Labor Committee, I led the Legislature in passing a Joint Memorial urging Congress to offer a 13-week extension of temporary unemployment compensation for workers who lost their benefits in January due to sunset provisions.

For the second-straight year, the Senate tried to turn its back on voters and freeze the minimum wage. Their plan would have capped the lowest hourly rate of pay when the state unemployment rate was higher than the federal

jobless rate, as it has been in 2004. A person working full-time at minimum wage in Washington earns less than \$14,900 a year — almost \$4,000 LESS THAN the federal poverty level for a family of four.

Washington citizens went to the polls in 1998 to show their support for a fair minimum wage by a 2-to-1 ratio, raising the state minimum wage that had lagged behind inflation for years. House Democrats defended the quality of life for Washington families with a fair minimum wage by defeating this rollback.

## Halting the Export of American Jobs

The export of American jobs to countries like China and India has become a staple on talk shows and the nightly news. Despite news of an economic "recovery," sixty-one per cent of Americans say they are concerned that they might lose their job because the employer may move that job to a foreign country.

An economic recovery doesn't mean much to you and I if the only job creation is located somewhere else. We can't keep private sector companies from relocating to a country where they can pay pennies a day for a worker. However, we do have a say if taxpayer dollars are paying for those jobs. I championed several pieces of legislation to curb the export of American jobs by state agencies.

Washington state currently spends tax money for contracts that create jobs overseas — jobs that used to be done right here. I sponsored the creation of a task force to study this practice in order to reduce job losses. This joint legislative task force on offshoring would have studied the extent of state-contracted work that has been outsourced overseas, the labor practices of these employers, and a cost-benefit

analysis. The study would have shown whether the state is actually saving money when the cost of worker retraining and unemployment in our state are factored in as well. Unfortunately, the Senate refused to go along with this plan and killed the legislation.

I also fought to require that all state agencies must report to the Legislature on contracts filled outside of the U.S., as well as the impact on our state's workers and economy. The language included in the budget passed by the House has now become a model for other states that want to address this loss of jobs overseas. Unfortunately, the Senate stripped this language out of the final budget. Despite this setback, I intend to hold further hearings to address the export of American jobs.

Offshoring also explains why I opposed the extension of the R&D tax exemptions. The high-tech industry has been the leader in exporting American jobs. These companies shouldn't receive taxpayer dollars so they can turn around and use that money to ship jobs overseas.

## Health Care

The state of health care in Washington and across the US has reached crisis levels — the skyrocketing cost of prescription drugs and health insurance has led to greater numbers of families cutting back on or completely going without any kind of medical care.

## Lowering Prescription Drug Costs

In our state, consumers pay twice or three times the price for the same medication they can buy in Canada. Almost 92% of my survey respondents believe that Washington citizens should have the right to purchase needed prescription drugs from Canada.



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The House tried to give seniors and others a chance for a price break on the cost of medicines they need to stay healthy. The bill would have brought down the cost of drugs by purchasing them from Canada, at savings of up to 80 percent and would have created a website to help residents easily find medication costs and availability at Canadian pharmacies. Unfortunately, the Senate killed this bill as well, but I am committed to seeing this legislation pass next year.

## Health Insurance

Recent news reports show that a large percentage of workers from many of our country's largest and most profitable employers receive their health care from the state. These companies keep salaries and hours low by forcing workers on to public health care plans in an effort to drive up their profit margin. Eighty-eight percent of those who responded to my survey believe that large employers should provide affordable health insurance for their employees.

I introduced legislation that would require large employers to reimburse the state for each employee subsidized by taxpayer dollars. It's not right that the public should pay for the health care of profitable private companies. This bill did not pass, but my work on this issue is not done – I fully plan to introduce this legislation again next year.

House Democrats were able to increase access to health care in the supplemental budget by:

- Giving hospitals and clinics nearly \$20 million in new funding so they can continue serving those with no medical coverage.
- Filling the shortfall in the children's vaccine program.
- Providing \$2 million in education loans and grants for students entering health professions.

- Reimbursing nursing facilities at a higher rate.
- Providing additional money to help teachers and other state employees pay for escalating health care costs

## Children's Health

Washington's health care system was severely affected by challenges of recent years, as low-income families, employers of low-wage workers, and the health insurers looked to the state for a lifeline. Because health care costs are such a significant part of the state budget, all citizens, as taxpayers, were affected. Due to cuts in last year's budget, 20,000 children lost out on health coverage.

House democrats were committed to restoring those cuts this year, and were successful in keeping Medicaid eligibility for kids at 200% of poverty level. We also successfully blocked efforts by the Senate to require co-pays for all participating families, even those far below the federal poverty level.

## Supporting our Homecare Workers

The Legislature finally recognized the important service homecare workers offer to seniors and persons with disabilities in our state. We approved the Home Care Workers' contract, giving these valuable service providers a well-deserved pay increase and health care coverage. These individuals provide critical assistance to 20,000 seniors across our state, allowing them to stay in their homes and help avoid costly long-term care facilities.

## Domestic Violence

Last summer the Crystal Brame tragedy opened our eyes to the threat of domestic violence, especially among law enforcement personnel. The reaction to her death prompted concerned citizens to reexamine law enforcement policies

when dealing with one of their own accused of spousal abuse.

The Legislature worked together to pass legislation requiring law enforcement agencies to develop a set of guidelines to address domestic violence, as well as restricting police officers from carrying a weapon in a courtroom when involved in the allegations. The package of legislation also allows victims of domestic violence to terminate rental agreements without paying additional rent and prohibits landlords from evicting or refusing to rent to them. In addition, the final supplemental budget includes \$2 million for domestic violence shelters. These steps ensure that we remove any barriers preventing victims of domestic violence from escaping the abuse.

## Keeping Sex Offenders Out of the Community

In an important step to reduce the number of sexual predators in our communities, the Legislature passed HB 2400. This law revision limits the use and increases the accountability over the Special Sex Offender Sentencing Alternative (SSOSA) program. SSOSA eligibility is limited to exclude violent offenders and those whose victim is a stranger. Restrictions on offenders are also tightened, as is court scrutiny of an offender's compliance with the terms of their sentencing. I wholeheartedly supported the passage of this bill; we need to be certain that those who are treated and released through sentencing alternatives receive the right supervision, and the public is safe from repeat offenders.

## Senior Tax Relief

With a fixed-income, many of our state's senior citizens are struggling to make ends meet. They cannot afford rising property taxes and should not be



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forced out of their homes. Fortunately, the Legislature was able to expand senior property-tax relief to retirees with household incomes up to \$35,000. This legislation is the first expansion of senior property-tax relief in Washington State since 1998, when the current \$30,000 eligibility ceiling was enacted.

In addition, eligibility is expanded in two other ways: (1) a person may retain property tax relief while he or she is confined to a boarding home or an adult family home, and the residence may be rented to pay the costs; and (2) the income used for determining eligibility is reduced by payments for Medicare health insurance premiums and for the costs of care in a boarding home or in an adult family home.

We also passed legislation that will allow companies selling Medicare supplement insurance policies to offer premium discounts based on spousal coverage, how frequently premiums are paid, and the method used to pay premiums, including automatic deposit.

For additional information, please contact the Pierce County Assessor's Office, at (253) 798-3710.

## ***Support for Washington military families & veterans***

The recent deployment of the Washington National Guard 81st Armor Brigade adds an additional 3,200 fighting men and women to the thousands of other Washington residents on active duty serving in combat.

### ***Military installations:***

This legislation establishes as a state policy that counties and cities with a military installation within or next to their boundaries should not allow development that hinders the installation's ability to carry out its mission.

The Legislature also sent a memorial acknowledging the strategic and economic importance of military installations in Washington State. It states that the President, Congress, and the Department of Defense recognize the strategic importance of our state's bases and save them from future base closures.



### ***Impersonation of a veteran:***

We made it a criminal offense to impersonate a veteran or an active duty member of the armed forces with intent to defraud for personal gain or to facilitate any unlawful activity.

### ***Veterans' health care needs:***

This legislation requests that the President will ensure the U.S. health care system in Washington State will be adequate to serve the current and future demands of our state's veterans.

All in our community need to be concerned with helping the families and loved ones of our deployed military and national guard troops meet their needs. The Minuteman Fund of

Washington provides emergency grants to families facing tough times created by this activation. If you would like to help, please call the National Guard Association of Washington at (253) 584-5411.

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